

The Mayor's Task Force on the Future of the Strand Theatre  
Final Report to Mayor Thomas M. Menino  
July 14, 2004

## **The Task Force**

The City of Boston owns the Strand Theatre in Upham's Corner, Dorchester. In 1979, the City leased the Strand to the M. Harriet McCormack Center for the Arts. This lease expired on June 30, 2004. Under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 30B, the City must issue a request for proposals (RFP) when leasing or disposing of property. In March of 2004, Mayor Thomas M. Menino convened a Task Force on the Future of the Strand Theatre to determine criteria for selecting the next management.

The Mayor selected individuals with a broad range of expertise and backgrounds to serve on the Task Force. Chaired by Ken Novack, former Vice Chairman of Time Warner, Inc., the Task Force includes: Ed Dugger, President, UNC Partners; Denise Gonsalves, Executive Director, Cape Verdean Community Unido, and Upham's Corner resident; Geri Guardino, Executive Director, First Night Celebration; Jose Mateo, Director, Ballet Theatre of Boston; Magnolia Monroe-Gordon, Boston Public School teacher and Upham's Corner resident; Klare Shaw, Senior Associate, Barr Foundation; and Tyra Sidberry, Director, The Diversity Initiative. Please see Appendix A for a biography of each Task Force member.

The Mayor's charge to the Task Force was three-fold: 1) to recommend a mission and vision for the future of the Strand Theatre; 2) to recommend to the Department of Neighborhood Development and other City departments selection criteria for a Request For Proposals (RFP), consistent with this new vision, to attract the most qualified organization to run the Strand Theatre; and 3) to advise the City of Boston on an interim strategy to ensure a smooth transition to the partner chosen through the RFP process.

## **Process**

The Task Force held its first meeting on March 29. At this meeting, the group identified the information it needed to fulfill its charge and set the schedule of meetings to facilitate this process. The group decided to meet twice a month for three months. The agendas for the Task Force meetings are attached in Appendix B.

The Task Force chose to engage two consultants to help it gather information that would be the basis for the mission, vision, and RFP criteria. First, the members sought community input to ensure that the mission and vision for the Strand reflected the input of members of its neighborhood. To assist in gathering this information, they wanted an expert who could help the Task Force design and facilitate an open, inclusive community process. Second, the Task Force wanted to learn about best practices in theater management nationally and about the competitive landscape of theaters in the Boston area.

The Task Force decided to capitalize on the unique relationship between Time Warner, Inc. and the Apollo Theater in Harlem by inviting Derek Johnson, currently the Executive Producer for Programming at the Time Warner Center and formerly President of the Apollo Theater (March 2001 -- December 2002) to join the Task Force for a meeting and share his experiences. Mr. Johnson described the rejuvenation of the Apollo, including its strategic partnership with Time Warner, and provided the Task Force with key lessons from his experience. These lessons include:

- The governance, management, and staff of the theater must embrace the vision; the vision must define the core activities of the theater.
- Visible, discernible change signals the new direction of the theater and drives investment from donors.
- The Apollo is not self-sustaining and requires fundraising to meet its goals.
- Real community engagement at every step is vital; the process must be open.

Although the Task Force recognizes that there are important differences between Upham's Corner and Harlem, and between the Strand and the Apollo, Mr. Johnson's discussion with the group was very helpful.

Finally, the Task Force sought background information, including history and press clips about the Strand (Appendix C) and information about the City's RFP process.

Early on in the Task Force process, the City of Boston retained Michelle Baxter as interim manager of the Strand Theatre. The City realized that the interim manager had to be in place well before June 30 to ensure a smooth transition. The City communicated with the Task Force about this decision.

## **Community Input**

The Task Force hired Marsha M. Morris of Marsha M. Morris Associates, International to help design and facilitate a community input process. The resulting plan included: 1) the development of information sheets to educate community members about the Strand, 2) interviews with selected community members to understand current perspectives about the Strand, 3) targeted focus groups with a cross section of stakeholders, which included a walk-through of the theater, and 4) an open community meeting held at New Boston Pilot Middle School on June 1st. Task Force members facilitated working groups during the community meeting. Outreach to the community included emails and phone calls to a master contact list created by the Task Force as well as publicity in neighborhood newspapers.

In addition to the work of the consultant, Task Force members and neighborhood residents Denise Gonsalves and Magnolia Monroe-Gordon conducted focus groups with youth and community members. Other Task Force members had formal and informal communication with community members about the Strand. Juan Evereteze, the Chair of the M. Harriet McCormack Center for the Arts, provided constructive comments and helpful cooperation through his conversations with Ken Novack, Chair of the Task Force.

The Task Force benefited from the input of various elected officials. The Task Force also set up an email address ([strand@cityofboston.gov](mailto:strand@cityofboston.gov)) to receive input and comments from the public.

See Appendix D for the following documents relating to the community input process:

- master contact list
- community input process plan
- communication documents including stakeholder letter, Strand fact sheet, capital fact sheet, and benchmarking fact sheet
- focus group instrument and list of attendees
- community meeting list of attendees
- minutes from the community meeting
- summary of the input from the community process
- letters submitted via the [strand@cityofboston.gov](mailto:strand@cityofboston.gov) email address and regular mail

Key findings from the community input include:

*A tremendous asset:* The Strand is an incredible building; it is a tremendous asset to the community, which must be preserved and utilized as an economic and cultural engine.

*Community involvement is key:* Participants believed that community involvement is a key aspect of their vision for the Strand (a community art hub, youth involvement, family-friendly events, a source of employment, etc.).

*The Strand's image:* The Strand's image needs to be improved; a creative marketing and public relations campaign should address issues of concern (e.g. safety, parking, quality of events, producer-friendliness, etc.) and promote the theater and the neighborhood.

*A public-private partnership:* A public-private partnership and/or a consortium of organizations should be considered as an option for the next management structure to ensure the fiscal, managerial, and technical capabilities needed to fulfill the community and the City's vision. Whatever the nature of the new operator, the City should retain some level of control over the Theatre for it to be successful.

*Maintenance and capital improvement:* The building maintenance, capital improvement, and cleanliness of the Strand need to be addressed. Some felt that, in its current state, the building is not a good representation of the community.

## **Survey of Best Practices and Competitive Landscape**

The Task Force engaged Liz Curtis of Technical Development Corporation (TDC) to conduct a survey of best practices and to help the Task Force analyze the competitive landscape of theaters in Boston. To learn about best practices, TDC developed an interview protocol to use with theaters outside Boston. Working with the Task Force and the League of Historic American Theaters, TDC identified potential benchmark theaters

that have similar market positions and seating capacity to the Strand. Six of the twelve suggested theaters participated in the project.

To understand the competitive landscape, TDC conducted two activities: interviewing local arts and cultural groups, and interviewing local theaters. For the first activity, TDC conducted a 15-minute interview with eighteen local arts groups. For the second activity, TDC interviewed theater managers at 19 of the 24 theaters in the Boston area with seating capacity above 500 seats. Many interviews included a site visit. For those who declined to be interviewed, TDC relied on past data from other arts projects they had conducted and web research.

Key findings from this work are divided among the benchmarking study, interviews with local arts and cultural groups, and the review of Boston theaters.

### *Benchmarking Best Practices*

The Board of Directors should be composed of individuals who address a particular need of the theater. Each individual should bring a specific expertise and a potential connection to marketing, fundraising, or legal services. The board should include community members and people who understand and can serve as ambassadors to the community.

The Executive Director must be a skilled manager, capable of working with the board, staff, and community; a person with strong business, people, and fundraising skills; a person who is willing to do the everyday work of the theater; a person who works well with and understands the local community and the surrounding area.

Staff should be as small as possible to facilitate smooth operation of the theater. Management should make use of volunteers for high volume activities.

The theater needs a mission that everyone in the organization understands and adheres to. It should create a programming niche and make itself known for it, especially in a large city with many competing theaters.

### *Local Arts and Cultural Groups Findings*

The Strand enjoys “good will” among Boston’s arts groups and should capitalize on this in the near-term.

Capital improvements, changes in management, and the development of key relationships with local arts groups are needed to ensure that the Strand thrives in the future.

The Strand must address the negative perception held by a portion of the public regarding parking and transportation, neighborhood safety, and pre- and post-theater amenities.

The Strand must rebuild relationships within the community and actively pursue programming that is the appropriate fit. The development of a few key relationships with presenters and anchor arts and cultural groups to provide a base of ongoing programming may be an effective strategy.

### *Competitive Landscape Findings*

The Strand Theatre is in a challenging size range (1400 seats), competing with established theaters that have existing relationships with presenters. In the next few years, the Opera House and potentially the Constellation Center will come on line. The addition of these new theaters in the same size range as the Strand may create additional competition and possibly even excess capacity.

Effective programming at the Strand will require: active pursuit of shows or organizations that are a good size and economic fit with the Strand; again, development of a few key relationships with presenters and anchor arts and cultural groups to provide a base of ongoing programming is key.

Please see Appendix E for the documents related to the survey of best practices and competitive landscape, including:

- The benchmark theater list, the list of local arts and cultural organizations interviewed, and the list of Boston-area theaters for the competitive landscape study
- The summaries of each benchmark interview
- The spreadsheet from the competitive landscape interviews
- The final report from TDC

### **Recommendations**

Based upon these sources of data, the expertise and background of the Task Force members, and informal conversations between Task Force members and key stakeholders, the Task Force identified what it believes are key components to the future success of the Strand:

- A well-governed organization, with expertise in facility and financial management, and a dynamic leader
- A diversity of programming, attracting audiences from the local neighborhood and throughout Boston
- A particular focus on youth and family-oriented programming and other youth-focused activities, including internships, apprenticeships, and employment
- Regular, ongoing involvement of the community in the development of the Theatre
- Strong collaboration and partnership between Strand management and arts and community organizations, businesses, and government agencies
- A renovated facility, with adequate production equipment, that is open and accessible

- Well-publicized programs and events
- A focus on addressing negative perceptions of the Upham's Corner neighborhood
- An interim manager who runs the Theatre consistent with the Task Force findings

The Task Force recognizes that a wide range of potentially effective managers of the Strand exist, including universities and other institutions, existing arts organizations, combinations of organizations working together, and community-based groups. There may also be for-profit organizations interested in managing the Strand. The Task Force recognizes that there may be several different possible structures, financial arrangements, and other considerations. In an effort to attract as many interested organizations as possible, the Task Force has purposefully avoided recommendations that would restrict the nature of the organizations that can participate in the process. However, it is important that any single organization or configuration of organizations submitting a proposal to the City is evaluated based on the alignment of its mission with the recommended mission of the Strand, the organization's embrace of the recommended vision for the Strand, and the quality of its responses to the recommended selection criteria.

Based upon the information gleaned through the three-month process, the Task Force recommends the following mission and vision statements for the Strand, and RFP selection criteria. Together, these can serve as the basis for choosing management of the Theatre. In addition, the Task Force has certain other recommendations based on its work.

#### *Mission Statement*

The Strand Theatre is a venue for a diversity of performing arts, cultural programming, and community events. Its mission is two-fold: to engage the multicultural residents of Boston, with a special commitment to youth and the Upham's Corner community; and to act as a catalyst in strengthening the economic fabric of the neighborhood.

#### *Vision Statement*

We envision a Strand Theatre that will be a thriving, attractive performing arts center, drawing audiences from the Upham's Corner neighborhood, all parts of the City, and across Greater Boston.

In fulfilling its mission, the Strand will:

- Celebrate diversity in all areas through its programming, its audiences, its employees, and the performers and producers who use its facilities.
- Promote community involvement in the growth and development of the Theatre.
- Partner with both the public and private sectors to advance the economic development of the neighborhood.

***Programming:*** The programming at the Strand will be diverse, appealing to audiences from Upham’s Corner and drawing people from across the City and throughout Greater Boston. The programming choices will be responsive to the interests of the local community, and will include major events and performances by nationally and internationally recognized artists, small community meetings, performing arts workshops for children, teens, and families, church services, health fairs, graduations and award ceremonies, and performances by neighborhood youth and local artists. The Strand will be an active theater, its doors open, its marquee lit, and its stage in use on a regular basis.

While appealing to all audiences, the Strand will be a special place for youth. Programming and education activities during the day and after-school will be geared toward youth, introducing them to theater and the arts. Young people will have employment and internship opportunities, learning about the administrative, creative, and technical sides of theater management.

The Strand will collaborate with arts producers, artists, schools, community organizations, the City of Boston, local and state government agencies, religious institutions, funders, and many others to create a strong, sustainable institution. The Strand will be affordable and accessible to the people who live and work in the neighborhood.

***Community Involvement:*** The Strand will engage all members of its broad and diverse community (e.g. geographic location, ethnicity, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and usage). The programming, events, and opportunities at the Strand will engage all members of the Boston community. There will be ongoing community involvement in the development and growth of the Theatre.

***Economic Development:*** The Strand will be a vital partner in the cultural and economic strength of the neighborhood. The Theatre will work in partnership with the City of Boston, the State, public and private economic development entities, local businesses and organizations, as well as foundations, corporations, and individuals. These partnerships will develop, maintain, and advance the Strand as part of the overall economic development of the neighborhood.

#### *RFP Criteria*

##### I. Mission

- a. How does your mission align with the mission and vision articulated in this RFP?

##### II. Existing Organizational Profile and Capacity

- a. Describe your current organizational structure, including information about your current staffing plan.
- b. Describe the current management of your organization, including bios of key staff members.

- c. The mission and vision for the Strand included in this RFP contains a commitment to diversity. Describe how your organization has demonstrated its commitment in this area. Describe your commitment to diversity at the Strand Theatre.
- d. Discuss your organizational capacity to adapt to the new responsibilities of running the Strand Theatre.
- e. Provide an annual operating budget for your organization.
- f. Is your organization unionized?

### III. Programming

- a. Describe your past experience with programming at a theater.
- b. Programming at the Strand should meet the needs of both the local and citywide communities. What is your programming plan and how will you create a balance between programming types?
- c. Discuss how you will ensure the variety of your programming mix and organizations with which you work.
- d. Discuss how you will maintain and build relationships with arts organizations that have used the Strand in the past.

### IV. Youth

- a. Describe your past experience working with youth and running youth programming.
- b. Describe your plans for youth programming and other opportunities for youth (such as internships) at the Strand Theatre.

### V. Community

- a. What do you think are the assets and perceived challenges of the neighborhood?
- b. Describe your past experience working with local communities.
- c. Describe how the community will be involved in advising your organization on an ongoing basis.
- d. Describe how you will build relationships with community members, organizations, and businesses.
- e. Describe how you will create access to the Strand Theatre for the community.
- f. What value would your organization add to the community landscape?

### VI. Collaboration/Partnerships

- a. Describe your existing and/or former collaborations with local entities.
- b. Describe your plans to collaborate or partner with local arts organizations, nonprofits, and businesses. Identify entities/organizations who would be potential partners for you as manager of the Strand. If possible, provide letters of support from these partners.



VII. Facilities Management and Operations

- a. Describe your organization's experience in theater operations and facility management.
- b. Describe your plan for the maintenance of the physical plant at the Strand.
- c. Describe your plans for the providing box office, other front-of-house personnel, security, and technical theater services
- d. How will you create a rental fee structure? What will be included in the rental price? How will you create a strong rental contract?

VIII. Marketing and Public Relations

- a. Describe your experience with marketing and public relations.
- b. Describe your marketing campaign for the programming and the space at the Strand, focusing in particular on reaching out to different constituent communities.
- c. Describe your overall public relations strategy for the Strand. How will you address issues of public safety and security, transportation, parking, and pre- and post-theater amenities?
- d. Attach representative press and promotional materials for your organization

IX. Governance

- a. Describe your current governance structure and how board members are chosen. Describe how your board members are reflective of the community you serve.
- b. Describe how you will ensure that your board is reflective of the Strand community. Identify what role you envision for the community in the governance of your organization.
- c. Provide the names, city/town residence, affiliations, and areas of expertise of each board member.
- d. If applicable, provide a copy of your 501(c)(3) status.
- e. Provide a copy of your articles of incorporation.
- f. Provide a copy of your Directors and Officers insurance.
- g. Provide a copy of your most current audited financial statements and the prior two years. If submitting an application as a partnership or consortium, provide the audited financial statements for each partner.
- h. If you are applying as a consortium, provide letters of intent/support from all members of the consortium.

X. Business Plan for the Strand Theatre

- a. Provide an annual operating budget for managing the Strand Theatre.
- b. Provide a budget narrative to explain your operating budget. Be sure to articulate the assumptions you used in preparing the budget.
  - i. What is your projection for earned income? How will you build the earned income over time and what will the steady-state look like?

- ii. What level of fundraising will you require? What is your plan for fundraising on an annual basis? Describe your fundraising capacity and past experience. List your current funders.
- iii. Describe your organizational structure. Who will be the manager of the Strand? What are his/her qualifications and experience? Provide a resume for the manager and other key staff. Will you use community members in your staffing plan and, if so, how? Discuss how you will ensure the diversity of the staff. Discuss how you will provide oversight of the staff and hold them accountable.
- c. Describe the system of performance measurement you will use for the Strand. How will you know whether you are successful? Describe the benchmarks you will use including a timeline for meeting them.

### *Other Recommendations*

**RFP Process:** The Task Force has two suggestions regarding the RFP process. First, in order to balance the need to provide adequate time for proposal submission and the need to complete the transition in a timely fashion, the Task Force recommends that the RFP be available for two months and that the submission deadline occur in September, after the end of the summer. This period of time and timeline should give possible bidders sufficient time to find partners, if necessary, and submit solid proposals, while still enabling the City to contract with new management prior to the end of the calendar year.

Second, ongoing community involvement should continue throughout the RFP process. This involvement could take the form of the inclusion of some Task Force members and others in advising the City selection committee during the selection process. We would strongly recommend a presentation of finalists in an open community forum. Task Force members would be willing to participate in the selection process if requested.

**Economic Development in Upham's Corner:** Many of the people the Task Force heard from pointed to the economic development of Upham's Corner as a key driver in the success of the Strand Theatre. They pointed to negative perceptions of the neighborhood—around safety, transportation and parking, and a lack of pre- and post-theater amenities—as potential stumbling blocks for the Strand. We believe that any plan to revitalize the Strand would be most effective if coupled with a plan for the revitalization of the entire neighborhood.

**Diversity in the Arts:** The Strand's size and location in a community of color make it unique, regionally and nationally—very few theaters of this size and grandeur exist outside of downtown theater districts. As a unique asset in Dorchester, the Strand has an opportunity to model for the greater arts community the celebration of its multicultural constituency by: showcasing diversity in the performing arts and other programming; featuring groups that place a premium on having a diverse troupe of performers; attracting diverse audiences; and employing staff and volunteers that are reflective of the community. The Task Force recommends that the City select a management organization that will demonstrate that the City's diversity is an asset.

***Partnerships with Established Institutions in the Performing Arts:*** The cultural community in Boston has struggled to fulfill its goals around diversity. The Strand is located in the largest, most diverse neighborhood in Boston and therefore has one of the most diverse audience bases of all Boston theaters. As the owner of the Strand Theatre, the City can play a role in helping to catalyze greater diversity in the arts and contribute to change of the cultural landscape in Boston. The City could encourage the more established performing arts institutions to utilize the Strand by bringing some of their shows to the Theatre. This will help these theaters meet their imperative to reach a broad group of theatergoers and meet the market demand of community members hungry for more options. As a neighborhood theater, the Strand is an accessible venue for community residents who may not chose to go to the Theater District. For some, it is the only theater they attend. Bringing “downtown” shows to the Strand gives these residents a chance to see performances they may otherwise miss. The Strand can be a place that unites people from different segments and neighborhoods of Boston. By fostering a partnership and exchange program between the Strand and established institutions, the City can move one step closer to achieving its vision for the New Boston.

***Capital Improvements:*** Arts organizations and community members alike pointed to the renovation of the building as a vital need in order to attract desirable programming. We recognize and appreciate the City’s many investments in the Strand, including providing the Theatre rent-free, granting annual operating support to cover utility costs, and funding ongoing capital project and structural maintenance of the building. We also understand that the City is engaged in a rigorous capital planning process to determine the total cost of renovating and restoring the Strand. The City must stay involved as an active partner in supporting the capital needs of the Theatre—a restored, polished theater is a worthwhile goal and should be pursued. But the City cannot do it alone. The Task Force urges the City to reach out to interested parties and proactively seek the participation of financial partners in a capital campaign to improve the condition and appearance of the Theatre.

***National Historic Register Designation:*** New management should work with the City of Boston to explore benefits and disadvantages of a designation by the National Historic Registry. Possible benefits may include access to specially designated public funds and the ability to sell tax credits to increase non-discretionary funds. The possible disadvantages may include an increased level of oversight in all physical improvements with an attendant increase in costs.

***Participation of City of Boston in Formal Governance:*** One question that was raised is whether the City of Boston should request a seat on the board of directors of the new management organization for the Strand Theatre. Consideration should be given to requiring board representation as another avenue for building and sustaining a stronger relationship than the City has had with management in the past.

## **Conclusion**

Revitalization of the Strand Theatre is a tremendous opportunity for the City of Boston to polish a long-standing jewel and to validate its commitment to healthy and vital neighborhoods. All areas of the City contribute to the regional and national image so important to the economic drivers that make Boston attractive. The Strand Theatre is wholly owned by the City of Boston. This is unique in the cultural world. Selection of an effective, creative management partner for the Theatre will enable the City to demonstrate a tangible investment in the cultural and economic sustainability of the citizens of Boston.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute, along with our colleagues and neighbors, our collective efforts to define a future for the Strand Theatre. We hope that our findings and recommendations will be helpful to the Mayor, and we thank him for the chance to serve.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kenneth J. Novack, Chair  
Ed Dugger  
Denise Gonsalves  
Geri Guardino  
Jose Mateo  
Magnolia Monroe-Gordon  
Klare Shaw  
Tyra Sidberry

## **Appendices**

- A: Biographies of Task Force members
- B: Agendas for Task Force meetings
- C: Press Clips
- D: Community input process data
- E: Best practices and competitive landscape data